

'C' for Craftsmanship not 'C' for Complexity

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My 88 year old father served his apprenticeship as a cabinetmaker before the Second World War. He knew how to make all those beautiful dovetail joints, and my childhood was replete with his commentary on how well a dresser was made, or how badly a door was hung. Once I remember him going up to a tradesman who was refurbishing a shop and correcting him on his sawing technique. The tradesman was covered in perspiration and battling with a saw and a large piece of timber. My father couldn't stand to watch any longer, and rather diplomatically he checked the guys saw, and then showed him how to hold the wood and how to stand. My father's demonstration was like putting a warm knife through butter. The tradesman was astonished and eager to have a go himself.

My father explained to me later that there was more to sawing timer than just moving the saw back on forth. As an apprentice he had been guided on how to stand correctly and how to respond to the different types of wood. "A craft skill" he said, "is a sort of memory embedded in your muscles, and it takes guidance and time to build up.

I put it to you that project managers that have a track record of successfully managing or bringing to completion highly dynamic bodies of work aren't born with that skill, they are made. And they are made, under the guidance of

others in the real world of managing projects. And we don't know very much about this, and we should!

This 'learning of the craft' behaviour (that is why, when, and how the development of these project managers best happens) I believe is being drowned out by the noise of those rushing to solve the complexity puzzle.

There are two underlying premises to my argument: first, is that the complexity discussion where project management attempts to adopt the language of complexity science will prove to be an endeavour that turns out to be a conspicuous failure; and second, that in the global rush to rationalise all that is project management we are overlooking an important quality related to competence – track record. And underpinning that, there is an even more important quality - craftsmanship. That is to say, that those with a good track record have built up their skills over time, and these skills go beyond a conscious competence. These are tacit skills. The projects managers that end up managing dynamic projects, as a result of their good track record, have in a sense, served an apprenticeship.

I am truly amazed by the amount of excitement the idea of managing complexity has caused. I don't blame anyone who picks up a book with the words "complex project management" in the title with the hope that its remedies will make their life as a project manager a little less stressful. However, before we begin to embrace the ideas of such books we ought to think about whether or not our expectations are truly realistic. Can we really manage complexity? And what is complexity anyway?

Slide 1

We commonly interchange our use of the words complex and complicated. Complex seems to have more prestige than complicated. Being known as a complex project manager certainly sounds prestigious and worthy of at least some competitive advantage.

State-of-the-art computers are complicated systems, so are jumbo jets, space rockets, and oil rigs. They in themselves do not exhibit complex behaviour. However, pretty much all systems in the natural world are complex ones.

Slide 2

If one were to closely study a bird such as the starling, one would never be able to speculate on how it would spectacularly behave in a group of a thousand or a hundred thousand. Their flocking behaviour is the emergent behaviour of these birds in groups.

The human race is a complex system. You and I flock. The activity of people self organising into businesses with the intention of creating wealth and therefore securing their survival is emergent behaviour of the human system.

So what about managing complexity? Throughout our evolved history we humans have learnt to harness the natural environment to our advantage. We build dams to store water and generate electricity; we harnessed the wind to power our ship and now we use it to power our homes; we controlled fire and even the atom. We've not developed as a species by embracing complex behaviour; we've developed by reducing complex behaviour. Present day Iraq is an example of emergent human behaviour. Stability in this country is maintained by reducing complex behaviour. We enforce laws through our courts and our police force and by the values that are taught to our children in our schools and in our homes.

So when we talk about managing a complex project or managing complexity – what specifically is the complex or emergent behaviour we’re referring to? Are we afraid that something unforeseen will happen? Is the unforeseen thing the complex thing that needs managing? Well, unforeseen events happen to pretty much most of us on a daily basis, but that doesn’t justify the need for a new philosophy of management. Most unforeseen events could have been foreseen if we’d invested time and energy in looking. Real emergent behaviour, real complex behaviour, you can’t possibly see coming just by looking at the parts of the system, because the complex behaviour emerges when these parts or systems interact with each other. When the buyers and sellers interact – prices of goods and services emerge.

Slide 3

Surely, if complex project management or managing complexity in projects is about anything, its got to be about reducing complex behaviour, like this intersection in Delhi, and not embracing it and as 19th century as this sounds that means the appropriate application of policy, methodology, and process. And I’m going to suggest the return of the concept of Craftsmanship, which not only acknowledges that competence in managing projects is built up over time under the stewardship of others, but that such stewardship or mentoring processes need to be understood and embraced, and the work environment structured to support it.

The project construct allows a corporation to adjust its business to the markets. One downside of such perpetual changing work roles is that craftsmen are no longer produced. Few spend long enough time on a task to master the art. It appears that today people need to be masters of quick study,

and study just long enough to do a reasonable job before moving on to another.

Skill is not just how to do something. Skill has a narrative or ritual about it. This narrative or ritual is more than just repetition, because it allows us to repeat our practices so that we (and others) might criticise them, and thereby improve our practices.

In general, I don't think that the PM discipline acknowledges that skills add up. Where in the development of project managers do we actively design repetition? Currently, the fact that a practitioner is moved from one type of project to another is considered to be good practise. Some practitioners reverse this condition of their work environment. But this does not develop a true sense of competence, rather a sense of making do and learning enough to get by.

I think that what we're missing in the development of project management skills is not only the development of skills themselves, but how do practitioners get better at them.

The project managers that end up managing highly dynamic projects have developed knowledge that is both explicit and tacit. This "tacit knowledge" is knowledge that exists in a social practice, and is not detachable from it. This knowledge can't be written down and can only be gained through personal experience. An example of tacit knowledge we might all share is that of riding a bicycle. Firstly I think you'd find it pretty impossible to write down or explain to a non-rider how you ride a bike. Secondly, I bet you didn't learn to ride by reading a text book or by workshopping the concept. It took personal

experimentation and practice to gain the necessary skills, to build the memory in your muscles.

I believe that the structure of organisations today work against this the development of this PM skill. The skills world of PM has no narrative that's detectible. Our institutions need to nurture a narrative to deepen skills. The simple art of mentoring is no longer a part of corporate culture, and the environment is beurocratic, and we confuse skill with qualification. We're currently focusing too much on qualifications, both academic and vocational. The world of qualifications is essentially a beurocratic enterprise focused on explicit knowledge rather than tacit knowledge which involves showing rather than telling, is none verbal, and it can't be beurocratically regulated.

Please, let's stop trying to adopt the language of complexity science. Stop trying to find out what we mean by non-linear, anti-positivism, and journey management. It will come to nothing.

Let us shift our enthusiasm to try to understand how project managers build a good track record, especially those who handle dynamic environments. Let's try to understand how these practitioners of the craft of project management become better? And then how do we as professional institutions and organisations better enable that.

Thank you.